



Aboriginal Footprints In The Littoral Zone: A Study Of Bioregions In Select Short Stories Of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker)

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Abstract

The land is a part of indigenous people's everyday life and identity. People and cultures are deeply rooted in the land. The coloniser's/whites' relationship with the land is anthropocentric, whereas the Aborigines' relationship is ecocentric. The Aborigines of Australia have a distinct culture that deals with the land in a biocentric way. Aborigines have world views, creation stories, beliefs, practices and myths rooted in Australia's unique bioregions. In Noonuccal's "Dugong Coming", Aborigines' relationship with marine life and their unique hunting laws shows their holistic way of dealing with the sea and its creatures. The story is set on Stradbroke Island of Australia, once stocked with natural beauty. The indigenous epistemologies and worldviews are significant to modern culture, essentially to address today's ecological concerns.

Keywords: Bioregion, land, Australia, Aborigines, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Indigenous people, myths.

Introduction

The land is a part of indigenous people's everyday life and identity. The landscape does not just refer to a geographical space or a part of the earth's surface, but it is much broader in scope and dimension, spanning various branches of study from geography to literature. The land is experienced in myriad ways by humans, both individually and as members of communities, clans, tribal groups, cultures and nations. Diana Eck Opines, "Landscape is relational and it evokes emotion and attachment" (Eck 11). A sense of belongingness and identity is developed in one's dwelling place over time. Indigenous peoples have developed attachment and knowledge of the living space over thousands of years.

Review of Literature

A literature survey done on Oodgeroo Noonuccal shows that only a few research articles are available on the author, and there is enough scope for research in her writings. Those few research articles attempt an ecocritical reading of the selected works of Noonuccal. A thesis by Dipanwita Pal titled

“An Ecocritical Reading of the works of Oodgeroo Noonuccal” is a good attempt at analysing the author's works from an ecocritical perspective. The researcher finds research possibilities/research gaps in terms of applying various aspects of Ecocriticism. This paper is unique in its attempt to read the short stories of Oodgeroo Noonuccal from a bioregional perspective and also critique the views of Aborigines and Colonisers towards the land.

Australia as a Bioregion: Land and People

Australia is a land of multiple bioregions like deserts, islands, bush landscapes, etc. A bioregion is a land identifiable by its natural boundaries, flora, fauna, climate, soil, landforms, human habitation and cultures that evolved from the land. “A bioregion is a part of the earth's surface whose rough boundaries are determined by natural rather than human dictates, distinguishable from other areas by attributes of flora, fauna, climate, soils and landforms, and the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to”(Sale 78). Australian bioregions were shaped over thousands of years by various factors.

People and cultures are deeply rooted in the land. It is a significant part of Australian aboriginal mythologies or their oral tradition. The Aborigines of Australia have a distinct culture that deals with the land in a bio-centric way. Each tribe or clan has developed its ecosophy in the place of dwelling. Aborigines have world views, creation stories, beliefs, practices and myths rooted in Australia's unique bioregions. Most tribes relate to human spirits, whereas some revere animal spirits and try to connect with them. Some tribes believe in both spirits. Significantly, all the aboriginal ceremonies and dreamtime experiences are rooted in the land.

The coloniser's/whites' relationship with the land is anthropocentric, whereas the Aborigines' relationship is ecocentric. It was considered terra nullius meaning “no man's land”, or an empty land by the imperialists. Landscape architect Lorzing states that “man and nature together determine the face of the landscape, sometimes in close harmony, but more often as fierce competitors”(Lorzing 43). Aborigines of Australia were considered uncivilized, less than humans, to claim ownership of the land or occupy it. Indigenous Australians have occupied the bioregions of Australia for thousands of years and have developed a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom by living and experiencing the land in myriad ways, despite the nature of the harsh landscape. The land is considered a resource and a commodity of value or value based on its utility value. The ecocentric perception of Aborigines treats the land as sacred irrespective of its utility to humans.

Australian aborigines are people who belonged to the land and understood their environment through their mythic consciousness of Dreaming. Dr. Suresh Frederick opines, “For an Aborigine, every tree, stone and creek had a spiritual meaning as well as a cultural history attached to it as they identified their ancestral spirits with their environment” (Frederick 59). The state of dreaming is the sacred attachment to the land they lived in and identifies the universal spirit of consciousness in every object of nature around them. Indigenous people of Australia lived in the littoral zone and outback of Australia. Most of the natives who lived near the seas were pushed inland in the process of colonisation. The displacement has caused great damage to their psyche and livelihood, which was mainly dependent on marine life. Aborigines have a deep sense of mythical connection with the numerous sacred spaces and marine creatures in the littoral zone. These sacred spaces are dreaming spaces, dreaming tracks, ceremonial spaces, and camping sites with continuing cultural implications.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker)

Oodgeroo was born on November 3, 1920, on Stradbroke Island in Queensland. Most Australians know her as Kath Walker, the name white people gave her, but in 1988 she changed her name to identify more closely with her Aboriginal heritage. She is the first major Aboriginal writer notable for her works on Aborigines- Aboriginal culture, the racial injustices to the natives and promoting interracial harmony, etc. Some of her notable works are “We are Going”, which ironically contrasts the dreamtime experience with the contemporary misery of the Aborigines. *Stradbroke Dreamtime* is another children’s book of short stories which focuses on exposing the Aboriginal culture and ways of life in contrast with the contemporary misery of the Aboriginal people and land.

Bioregions in Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s Works

In “Stradbroke”, Noonuccal narrates the impact of colonialism on Stradbroke island, which was once pristine. “Stradbroke, an island that was once stocked with natural beauty: the rocks of Point Lookout at the far end of the island, and the sea smashing its boiling foam against the rock base: ferns and flowers are growing in abundance; the white miles of sand stretching as far as the eye could see, daily washed by the rolling pacific ocean”(Noonuccal 6). Stradbroke is an island inhabited by various clans, the Noonukul of Amity point, the Goenpul and Kooberpul. of Dunwich. It was one of the most populated Islands with distinct geographical features. In Aboriginal language, the Rocky Point Lookout is called “Moodloomba”(place of rocks). Noonuccal’s “Dugong Coming” shows Aborigines’ relationship with marine life, their unique laws of hunting and their holistic way of dealing with the sea and its creatures. The story is set on the Stradbroke Island of Australia, once stocked with natural beauty. Stradbroke had a wide variety of flora and fauna with abundant marine life and wetlands. Wetlands are a unique ecosystem that supports a diverse range of animal and plant life. Recent research also suggests that Stradbroke is home to wetlands dating back 200,000 years.

Dugong (*Dugong dugon*), a marine mammal known as Sea Cows, is mostly found in warm coastal regions. Australia has the largest population of over 50,000 Dugongs. The dugong is part of the staple diet of Aborigines. In “Dugong Coming”, Old Sammy of Myora, the catcher of dugong, takes his nets into Moreton Bay which has the highest concentration of dugong. Aborigines caught the dugong and shared the fleshy meat with each family in the tribe. The man with ten children will get the largest portion of the meat than a man with two. This is the aboriginal way of sharing the collected food among the members of the tribe. It should not be shared with other tribes. They hunt the dugong to satisfy their need for food. “They believe that to hunt a dugong when their bellies are full would be to act against the natural law of “kill to eat”. They believe that the good spirit would punish them severely if they killed dugong out of greed” (Noonuccal 56). According to the Aboriginal law of hunting, it is a crime to kill dugong for pleasure or when their stomach is full. Dipanwita Pal, in her thesis, states, “The story “Dugong Coming” also refers to the traditional hunting rules of the Aborigines. It shows that the Aborigines no more hunt dugong, the animal that has been listed by IUCN as vulnerable to extinction” (Pal 191). Today, the Aborigines do not hunt Dugongs as most are eating the white man’s food. Indigenous people have slowly assimilated into the mainstream culture, losing their unique bioregional practices.

Commercial hunting practices by colonisers have drastically reduced the population of dugong. They are hunted for oil, meat and medicines. For Aborigines, Dugong hunting is part of their Aboriginality and is important for maintaining community bonding or kinship. It is a part of most of their ceremonies. Aborigines undertake controlled hunting practices to maintain the population of dugongs. Small dugongs and pregnant dugongs are not hunted. They are aware of the breeding sites of dugongs and sustainably manage the coastal regions, thereby preserving the bioregion. The unique

features of the Aboriginal littoral zone-Stradbroke Island, flora, fauna, Islands, wetlands, rivers, creeks, Aboriginal laws of hunting, dreamtime experiences, sacred sites and ceremonial practices are some of the bioregional features of Stradbroke Island.

Today, the sea is polluted, and marine life is affected by tourism on Stradbroke island. “Tourists come to soak up the sunshine and bathe in the blue pacific, scattering as they go their discarded cans and cigarette packs, bottles and even the hulks of cars”(Noonuccal 6). Human mindless actions have done great damage to the ecosystem. Turtles are ingested with marine debris and abandoned fishing nets have killed numerous dugongs—turtles, dolphins, crabs, fish, whales and crocodiles. The anthropocentric activities have resulted in the loss of a bioregion.

In the wake of the recent apocalyptic bushfires in Australia, the Australian people and the government should develop bioregional consciousness and look for solutions to the ecological challenges in the Aboriginal epistemologies. People’s innate tendency to relate with the land is witnessed in the aftermath of the bushfires, many of whom offered water and medical care to thirsty koalas, injured kangaroos, etc. One may always strive to live with an earth-centred approach /ecocentric way of life, though adapt to the homogenised global cultural practices for practical necessity and move towards sustainable practices which preserve the integrity of the land. Individuals and governments in collective action can significantly contribute to preserving the existing bioregions. In colonisation, Aborigines have lost their bioregions and a whole storehouse of wealth and wisdom developed in communion with the littoral zone over thousands of years. The indigenous epistemologies and worldviews are significant to modern culture, essentially to address today’s ecological concerns.

Conclusion

Living in amity with nature is the need of the hour to protect the bioregion. The anthropocentric activities greatly impacted the aborigines and their way of life. This research is relevant as indigenous people's lives are affected worldwide by the loss of bioregions. In this age of environmental crisis, it is high time to defend valuable bioregions across the earth to sustain life on earth

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